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Truth and autobiography in stand-up comedy and the genius of Doug Stanhope

Stuart Hanscomb, School of Interdisciplinary Studies, University of Glasgow:
stuart.hanscomb@glasgow.ac.uk

Abstract

It's common for stand-up comedians to tell stories as well as, or instead of, jokes. Stories bring something extra to the performance, and when presented as true add a further layer of appeal. However, most stories told as if true by comedians are not true. A categorizing of forms of comedic story is presented involving the dimensions of grammatical person and truthfulness. Some advantages of comedians' employing true first-person stories are discussed, and these considerations are then explored through the role of autobiography in the work of Doug Stanhope. Many aspects of Stanhope's (highly unusual) life find their way into his shows, and true stories and his personality more broadly are folded into other elements of his act (such as his political views). Links are made with Kierkegaard's notion of 'inwardness' and Carl Rogers' therapeutic 'congruence' and 'transparency', and it's argued that authenticity is a prerequisite for the quality of self-disclosure that is basic to Stanhope's excellence.

1. Introduction

This article¹ explores the role of autobiography in comedy: how it works and how it can be the basis of a distinctive kind of appeal or greatness. My exemplar is Doug Stanhope, a comedian whose work is connected to his experiences, values, preferences and personality to an unusual degree, and who is also considered one of the best stand-ups in the world (Provenza and Dion 2010, 65). My argument is that in Stanhope's case these two factors – his use of autobiography and his greatness – are causally related, and that the nature of this relationship sheds some revealing light on the role of truth and sincerity in stand-up comedy. I will also argue that we can gain some insight into what makes Stanhope impressive – both as a comedian and as a person – by applying the lens of Kierkegaard's distinctive form of authenticity known as 'inwardness'.

2. Comedy, stories and truth

Many comedians tell stories as well as, or instead of, jokes, and on the whole those told as if autobiographical, and therefore nearly always in the first person ("I gave up smoking recently ..."), are more engaging and funnier than those told in the third person. My own experience of comedy affirms this, most comedians choose this style, and masterclasses on how to write and perform comedy typically include advice of this kind.² The reasons for this are not

¹ This is a shortened version of a submitted article with the same title (forthcoming, 2022), and was the basis of a presentation at the British Society for Aesthetics Synergy Conference *How to do Things with Jokes* at the University of Kent, October 2019.

² For example we find it in Director of the American Comedy Institute, Stephen Rosenfield's book *Mastering Stand-Up* (2017, Ch.5); and Judd Apatow has 'get personal' as the second of his 10 tips for improving stand-up comedy writing (2019): "comics who make themselves the main character and lay themselves bare to the audience" he says, "are often the strongest performers."

entirely clear, but it could simply be that we have an appetite for truth, and that first-person narratives carry greater associations with truth. This is especially the case where truths are interesting, and they are interesting all the time they prompt something unarticulated or half-forgotten (as in observational comedy), or open up new perspectives. A related point (discussed further in Section 3) is that detail tends to be associated with plausibility, and firsthand accounts permit increased levels of detail since the teller was (apparently) there to witness or, better still, be part of unfolding events. Another reason might be that we enjoy the increased intimacy with the performer that autobiography brings.³ When stories are regarded as true we relate to the teller as someone like us (as we would regard a friend) rather than simply as a performer of an act.

However, most stories told by comedians are not true, and there are various ways in which they are intended to be received by audiences as truthful or otherwise. In these respects, five varieties of the comedic use of stories can be identified:

Type 1: Stories told as if true (and have a ring of truth to them) but are known by the audience not to be. These might be told in the first or third person and are variously referred to as ‘shaggy dog stories’ or ‘spinning a yarn’. A fast-fading example is Ronnie Corbett’s armchair segment in the *The Two Ronnies* (BBC, 1971-1987).

Type 2: A currently more popular variation on stories that are evidently not true are surreal or absurdist ones, told in the first, second or third person, that might function tonally to enhance shock or disgust, or be allegorical. Alexei Sayle specialises in these; and Frankie Boyle’s closers in his *New World Order* TV shows (aired since 2017) - invariably escalating and grotesque apocalyptic scenes mushrooming from current affairs stories – epitomise this style.

Type 3: Stories told in the third person which are true events (“Did you hear about ...?”), at least in so far as they appear in the news media. These are of course fundamental to satirical shows such as *Have I Got News for You*, *The Daily Show*, John Oliver’s *Last Week Tonight* or BBC Radio 4’s *News Quiz*. And they are common in stand-up routines, especially where the comedian wants to make a point as well as be funny (for example Bill Hicks’ bits on the Waco incident or the LA riots). Invariably these will be personalized by the comic in some way, serving as a catalyst or segue. They might generate a punch line, a hypothetical or surreal variation or implication (very effectively used by Mark Steel (see below) and Frankie Boyle (see above)), or a more analytical consideration of themes exemplified by the story.

Type 4: Stories told in the first person as if they are true, and that maybe the audience accepts as true, but which are largely fabrications. The nature of this type of story means comedians are not generally going to be openly admitting to their lack of veracity, but the prevalence of this approach is highlighted by Stewart Lee’s genre-exposing asides to camera in Series 1 of his BBC show *Stewart Lee’s Comedy Vehicle* in 2009. In the manner of a typical stand-up he starts to tell a story (“I was walking through Heathrow Airport”), but after each sentence, with only the slightest interruption to his rhythm, undermines the statement (“I wasn’t”, “I’ve never been there”).⁴

³ In Hannah Gadsby’s words, ‘a story is intimacy’ (Valentish 2018).

⁴ See Episode 5.

Type 5: Stories told in the first person as if they are true, and which largely are true. These can be of any length, but include themed autobiographical shows such as Trevor Noah's *That's Racist* (2012), about his upbringing in South Africa; Sara Pascoe's *LadsLadsLads* (2017), about her break-up with fellow comedian John Robins;⁵ Lucy Porter's *Pass it on* (2018), about (among other things) her family history and the menopause; Hannah Gadsby's highly lauded *Nanette* (2018) on her experiences of childhood abuse, misogyny, homophobia and (most famously) her identity as a comedian; and Amy Schumer's *Growing* (2019) themed around her pregnancy and her husband's autism diagnosis. Henry Rollins is perhaps the most heavily and consistently autobiographical comedian. His stories make up most of his shows (from the mid-1980s onwards) and range from childhood traumas to tours with his band. Exemplified by Richard Pryor's sets on his marriage break-ups, illnesses and drug issues, Richard Zoglin (2008, 44) refers to the "confessional intensity" of some of these acts, as the performer cathartically filters personality-flaws, personal tragedies and bad decisions through humour.

In this same category, but in contrast to the confessional approach, is the seeking out of experiences with their re-telling in mind. A contemporary British example is Dave Gorman. Two of his early shows were stories of real-life intercontinental quests: In *Are You Dave Gorman?* (2000) he seeks people who share his name, and in *Dave Gorman's Googlewhack Adventure* (2003) he follows a chain of ten googlewhacks (pairs of words that yield one hit on Google). His more recent *Modern Life is Goodish* series (2013-17) is largely built around his interventions and experiments with half-hidden everyday oddities. More will be said about the distinction between things that have happened in the course of life, and things that are made to happen for the sake of the story, in Section 5.5 (below). Also discussed below (see 5.2) is the important matter of how we can distinguish between Type 4 and Type 5 stories; in other words, how we can know which stories are indeed true. There I make a lengthy argument for Stanhope's veracity, but otherwise all I can claim here is that some stories will be substantially true, and therefore a genuine distinction exists between Types 4 and 5, even if the examples mentioned turn out not to be Type 5.

Within this broad category of true stories there is a further and important variation. Some tales are, in a sense, told from another place: conveying unusual or extreme events, making outrageous and unexpected claims, and perhaps implicitly or explicitly challenging the audience to behave or think about the world differently. This is also fundamental to Stanhope's act. It contrasts with autobiographical material that covers more familiar ground, and this difference reflects a spectrum in the aims of comedy more generally, whether autobiographical or not. At one end the unexpected and the challenging: taboo subject matter, extreme views, personas distorted beyond recognition, unconventional deliveries,⁶ or the influence of dada, surrealism or absurdist theatre.⁷ At the other the articulation of what is very well known to audiences, such as the "rapid fire" "accurate and instantly recognisable" observations of Michael MacIntyre (Lee 2010, 49). Mark Steel is representative of the majority who lie in between. He is often observational, but his distinctive comedic art involves the re-framing of familiar situations with the punchline taking the form of analogies

⁵ Robins had his own show about the break-up (*The Darkness of Robins*), performed at the same venue at the Edinburgh Fringe as Pascoe's.

⁶ For example, going against all public speaking advice, Wil Hodgson (in *Good Wil Hodgson* (2005) at least) would spend minute-long segments of his show staring at a single person in the audience. This wasn't funny, but it was eye-catching and not incongruent with his monotone style and the counter-cultural content of the show.

⁷ See for example the work of Andy Kaufman or Simon Munnery.

which then fuel the developing story and (usually serious) political point. For example, when the vicar at his non-religious father's funeral asks the mourners to 'feel God's presence' he says 'What a cheek! ... It was as crude as if I'd got up and said, 'And when we see my dad depart, why not choose that moment to buy this week's copy of *Socialist Worker*.' (Steel 2001, 172)

This spectrum brings to the analysis another sense in which stand-up comedy has the potential to reveal something about the comedian – when it makes a 'point'. Some of the stand-ups mentioned above (especially those under Type 3) have an agenda that is explicitly evaluative – often political or ethical - and others might include satirical elements which are less central to their act. Often these are associated with distinct forms of emotionality such as anger or despair, and as with stories, the extent to which either the 'point' or the associated feeling is true will fall on a spectrum. This is important to mention since it is relevant to Stanhope's act, and because stories of all kinds often gain interest or depth through offering or provoking ethical judgements. (Kearney, 2002) The result is that there is more than one way in which a stand-up act can be more-or-less true: in terms of the stories told, and in terms of the evaluations and the feelings that accompany them. In any given instance it is, of course, possible for both, neither, or just one of these to be reflective of the reality of the comedian's experiences and values.

3. Truth and audience desires and expectations

In between Types 4 and 5 there will of course be many hybrids. There will be stories with grains of truth, loosely based on truth, largely true but with some embellishments for dramatic and comedic effect. On the whole though there are good reasons for thinking something closer to Type 4 accounts for the majority of story-telling stand-up these days. It's not that easy to produce direct proof of this statement, and if comedians are reluctant to discuss the issue it could be because it's something of a trick of the trade. The Penn and Teller of comedy, Stewart Lee, has though exposed it (see an example on the previous page of this article), and in recent online content comedians Elis James and Jon Robins (2020) discussed the question of whether it matters if comedians' stories are true with Sarah Kendall. The view was that it doesn't much (so long as it's funny), and the implication is that typically you'll find at most a 'kernel' of truth in what is told. Stand-up Sam Tallent, in his excellent novel about a Stanhope-type comedian, says of his protagonist: 'Unlike most stories comedians told, the events he related actually occurred'. (2020, 99)⁸

The prevalence of Type 4 stories generates something of a tension in the genre caused by the following considerations: First, stories with the storyteller as the central character are often funnier, perhaps hipper, than stand-alone jokes or stories told in the third person. Second, ways in which we willingly suspend disbelief notwithstanding, a significant part of the appeal of first-person stories is that audiences take them to be true. Indeed, truth can substitute for funniness. Often comedy doesn't simply make us laugh, but also provides information, education, empathetic engagement and sometimes inspiration and new ways of looking at the

⁸ When presenting a version of this paper (in 2019) no one among a conference audience comprising comedians and academics disagreed with the assumption that stand-up stories are largely made-up, and first-hand knowledge derived from decades of watching and writing comedy, running gigs and knowing professional comedians, makes it clear to me that there is little doubt about the truth of this claim.

world. Where storytelling is present, laughs will usually be thinner on the ground in comparison to gag-crackers, but this isn't a problem. You might say it is a matter of quality over quantity, but the quality isn't simply a function of how hard you laugh when the laugh comes, but the way the story, simply by virtue of being a story, adds to the humorous experience.

In a sense invented stories function like novels and short stories; their being made up is no barrier to immersion and to them being carriers of general or deep truths (Nussbaum 1990, 1995; Carroll 2002; Oatley 2011). However, there is a further feature of stand-up that complicates this point: whereas the author of a novel is in some important respects irrelevant to how we engage with their work (it is the characters we engage with), this is typically not the case with the comedian.⁹ There is something about the genre that leads the audience to desire something from the performer as a person. Miriam Chirico (2016, 42) suggests this is partly to do with intimacy: it is one person talking, with no apparent script, often in fairly close-proximity and with the appearance (but of course very rarely the reality) of less artistry or form than other kinds of performance. The stand-up is thus far more exposed than even the solo singer. Whether it is real or not, and whether the comedian wants it or not, the upshot is that an audience will find it unusually difficult to separate the author from the product. Moreover, we tend not to want to make this separation; we don't just want to hear the jokes, but to be closer to their creator and performer.

A final consideration adding to the tension inherent in Type 4 stories is that a true story is one we can have a certain kind of belief in. If good novels contain experiences we can relate to and understand as containing general truths about the human condition, a true story provides evidence in the form of witness testimony. The communicator becomes someone who isn't just imagining but who has been there and knows what it feels like. We can better trust the fine-grained detail and affective features of the events they portray. Hugh Barker and Yuval Taylor (2007) describe folk/blues singer Jimmie Rodgers as singing in such a way that the audience would believe, and wanted to believe, that what he sang was true. Mostly it wasn't true, but added value – a 'new level' – was reached when he decided to sing about the tuberculosis that was killing him (in the song *T.B. Blues*). The song holds special significance for his fans, they say, because it allows them to be closer to their hero; audiences are often as much (or more) committed to the singer as to their songs, leading to a desire for the lyrics to reveal something about the artist. Also, though, it can add something to the artistic product. Not only are general truths about the world being expressed, and not only is the song performed as if the singer has experienced those truths first-hand, the listeners know that the singer has indeed experienced them first-hand. Great art does not require this third feature, but when it is present we have something that is, if not better, then importantly different. If this analysis is right, then at least in part we have an explanation of the appeal of first-person stories. Stand-up performers who play to this appeal now face a choice: to honestly (if selectively) talk about their experiences, or to significantly exaggerate and embellish, or simply make things up that are then told as if the complete truth. It is the second of these options (chosen by most it seems) that must, then, generate a tension. If the appeal is in part based on the audience's desire for truth and intimacy, the reality is not only falling short of this, but doing so in a way that hides this fact. The audience are, in a sense, being conned.

⁹ An exception being where they are clearly playing a role, such as with Emo Phillips.

A variation on the ‘appearing real because it’s effective while not being real’ is through manipulating the fourth wall. We are typically fond of the mistakes or other random moments which (let’s assume) are genuine, and are then deliberately left in the recorded version of a song. Bob Dylan’s guffaws and subsequent re-start of his *115th Dream* or Joni Mitchell’s laughter at the end of *Big Yellow Taxi* are good examples. The appeal is maybe that we get a glimpse of the person rather than the performer, or perhaps the relaxedness these moments indicate reinforces their confidence and competence. I saw *We are Klang* (a three-person comedy troupe including the now famous Greg Davies) in a tiny venue at the Edinburgh Fringe in 2006. I loved it, especially its apparent spontaneity and chaos (reminiscent of *Tiswas* or *OTT* in the ‘70s and ‘80s). The ‘thrown together’ quality and the important sense that they were enjoying this as much as the audience was highlighted by a few occasions where the performers were struggling to control their own laughter. However, when I saw the show a second time later in the festival the edge was taken off because it was pretty much identical; the ‘chaos’ was orchestrated, right down to the cast’s apparent efforts to control their laughter.¹⁰

One response to the suggestion that we are being ‘conned’ in these instances is to say that audiences know all of this but are willing to suspend disbelief for the sake of the enhanced experience. Another is to invoke *caveat emptor*, and if there are any ethical issues lurking this seems a perfectly reasonable justification. Just as with sales and marketing, responsibility is placed on consumers to have some level of insight into the norms of the trade. In terms of the quality of the experience, on the other hand, maybe it is better to not have to suspend disbelief. The potential for immersion would be greater because we know we are getting all the benefits of actual autobiography as well as the comedy.

4. Sincerity

It is important to address not just the veracity of stories, but the extent to which they are meaningful to the teller. I take this to be central to the idea of sincerity, explained by Sylvie Loriaux (2017, 1) in this way:

To be sincere or truthful means above all to mean what we say. ...
At its core is the idea that although there is no duty to speak and even less to say everything we think, from the moment we say something we ought to mean it, that is, we ought to believe in its veracity. Of course, we can be wrong about the facts: some of the things we say may, as a matter of fact, prove to be false. But what matters from a sincerity perspective is that, at the time we express these things, we also believe them to be true.

A comedian can talk sincerely on an issue they feel strongly about because it comes from the heart; they mean it. This implies the presence of belief, but the presence of belief does not guarantee sincerity because, in the moment at least, a true story or a valid point will not

¹⁰ Part of Boris Johnson’s appeal is a kind of blundering affability that will endear him to some of the electorate. During the 2019 Tory Party Leader elections broadcaster Jeremy Vine made the point that Johnson’s ‘buffoon act’ might be put on. He was with Johnson at two awards ceremonies 18 months apart. On both occasions Johnson arrived much later than expected (minutes before he was due to go on) and proceeded to feign unpreparedness and generally mild ineptitude in a more or less identical fashion before nailing the speech. It appears to be an act. (Vine 2019)

always be accompanied by an individual's deep appreciation or felt sense of its truth. For example, if a comedian has become bored with telling a story then in the moment the subject matter and its significance are estranged.

Doug Stanhope has been critical of the gentler end of observational comedy for having 'no passion, no rage' (OBBN, track 9). If implied by this is an absence of sincerity (which it seems to be), then this is not right. Richard Zoglin, for example, describes Jerry Seinfeld as 'trivial' but 'never phony or forced' (2008, 222); 'his voice on-stage, you felt, was exactly the voice you'd get if you were sitting with him over a bowl of cereal.' (220) In Seinfeld's own words in 1991: 'Anyone who's seen what I do knows I am revealing how my mind works. Alright, so I talk about cereal and not about existentialism or drug addiction. I work with the material that's natural to me.' (220-21) A sign of the 'natural' in this sense is congruence between the subject matter and delivery: the confluence of an open, honest message, a lucid understanding of the meaning of that message, and a delivery that embodies this meaning. Put in this way sincerity has a connection with spontaneity that we will encounter again when discussing Stanhope and Carl Rogers' notions of 'congruence' and 'transparency' (see Section 5.4).

Sincerity is, then, important for this discussion in two respects. One is to remember that where comedians are trading on apparent truths there are two aspects that explain its appeal: that they are informing us about the world beyond their imagination, and that they are sincere about what they are saying. The second respect is that sincerity brings a distinct quality to the stand-up show: one of engagement, enthusiasm, and an enhanced sense of the reality of the stories being told. On top of this, this reality may have a point to it (political, ethical etc.), and where it does, we have a different sense in which truth is significant in stand-up. An evaluation, and its associated tone, can be sincere or otherwise. In cases where a comedian has sincere points to make, and wants to tell true stories as well, then the act gains an added autobiographical quality. Doug Stanhope is just such a comedian.

5.1. Doug Stanhope's Comedy

My choice of Stanhope as an exemplar requires some qualifying. He is regarded by a significant number of comedy fans and comedians as one of the best stand-ups around. I agree, and I know his material very well through live performances and his CD and DVD releases. I have also read his autobiographical books and listen to his podcasts. That I am a fan (but not a fanatic) could bias my assessment if I was assessing him, but I'm not assessing him. Plenty of people think he's a genius, and I'm not seeking to evaluate that view. I'm assuming he's a distinctively excellent comedian, and I'm arguing that in part this is because of the way autobiography increasingly infuses his work. The second qualifying point I want to make at the start of this section is that there could well be other comedians who I don't know, or don't know well enough, who share Stanhope's autobiographical qualities. If this is right, then they are being excluded simply because of the limitations of my knowledge rather than any objective assessment of their suitability.

Stanhope has been performing stand-up comedy since the 1990s. He has a loyal and committed fanbase, won multiple awards, is highly rated by many other comedians, but remains niche, or a kind of cult. He's rarely seen on TV these days and only erratically in the past (mostly in the US).

The content of his act is a combination of explicitly gross and/or sexual topics, other stories he finds funny, and issues from politics and ethics: direct action, euthanasia, abortion, eugenics, mental health stigma, prejudice against physical appearance, just war and, most regularly, children and population control and personal freedoms concerning drugs and sexual practices. Within all of these we find sincerely delivered autobiography of the type 5 variety. There's a lot of it, it's apparently largely uncensored, and it's detailed.

He is often compared with taboo-challenging outsiders like Lenny Bruce or Bill Hicks, but the crudity is on another level and the autobiographical element more detailed and fundamental to his act than Hicks' and more disciplined than Bruce's. Tonally he's confident (but not arrogant), confrontational (but not threatening), sometimes angry, but more often imploring or despairing. Nearly always though a certain warmth comes through (which is apparently true of his non-stage self, and certainly noticeable in his books and podcasts), which is a conspicuous contrast to Hicks. He has an awareness of the character of his audience: for example, people of a similar disposition to him, people who have travelled a long way to see him, people who he's met before the gig, or had interactions with online. He's also sensitive to an audience's current mental state. At the Edinburgh Playhouse in 2012 he noted the barely in control group of young men at the front: "I know what you've been doing" ('pre-gaming' by drinking all day, at minimum); and similarly sympathetic observations are evident in his recorded works as well. In FAS (track 11),¹¹ commenting on what stand-up means to him and his relationship with his fans he says, 'this isn't so much about a career as feeling not so alone.' Adrian LeBlanc (2014) describes his shows as having the 'quality of a reunion' where 'everyone is welcome – especially those who are unwelcome elsewhere.'¹²

A lot of what he says is of course critical of various people and practices, but he also has some recommendations for living well. Some are trivial, for example, pace yourself sexually (STE), or sleep with someone worse looking than you because that memory will mean so much to them (STE). Others are more serious: excess in moderation (STE); don't learn from others' mistakes (STE); real intimacy is not found in sex but (e.g.) in redressing a disoriented friend's fresh mastectomy wound (OBBN); or drum circles are a pointless form of protest, find more inventive ways to get at the people who are the source of the problem (BHP). The delivery of his ideas is invariably well-crafted and funny, and underneath it they are also quite wise: significant thought has gone into them and they are grounded in his experiences. They are funny in large part because they fit into the show's broader narrative, combine real world events with interesting opinions and comedic imagination (including the regular employment of well-chosen analogies), and with a use of language that can border on the poetic: the only reason the old guy at the end of life hasn't killed himself yet is because 'he couldn't figure out a way to do it with pudding' (DL); smokers standing outside bars are like 'saltlick for the homeless' (NPH), or his ejaculate in the standing water of the shower basin 'coagulates' and attaches itself to his toe hairs like 'like an angry swarm of gummy bear boner-sap' (NPH)).

He says of himself 'I am a one-trick pony as a comedian. I have my material and that is all. I can't act. I can't do characters. I fail at crowd work.' (TNF, 19) Occasionally he does do characters (e.g. the prostitute criticising Keynesian economics on BTG, track 7), and later I will attempt to qualify the part about crowd work, but otherwise illustrated by this reflection

¹¹ Most references to Stanhope's CDs, DVDs and books are abbreviated. For a key see the end of the article.

¹² In NPH he jokes that he's in competition with ISIS since they're both trying to recruit disaffected elements of society.

is the self-disclosure that is fundamental to what he does. Along with the ‘material’ the audience also get Doug Stanhope the person, both within the content and in the sincerity of the delivery. Little or no suspension of disbelief is required, and from the performances, what others say about him, and from what he says about himself, this is clearly of great importance to Stanhope. When a quotation is chosen from a *Sunday Times* review for the cover of the *No Refunds* DVD it reads: ‘What makes Stanhope essential viewing is that none of this is an act.’ His style is autobiographical, by which I don’t just mean his act is full of stories of what he’s experienced, but that his self is somehow conspicuous in most of what he delivers. For example:

5.1.1. There are “Did you hear about/notice” bits, such as the two-headed baby (DH), the Mississippi dildo bust (DH), or public service ads in Manchester on the consequences of calling out paramedics just to beat them up (FAS). In each case he makes the story his own, sometimes by contextualizing it within his life, sometimes by aligning it with stories about his (often sexual or political) preferences or views or with surreal imaginings that also express desires that are congruent with his personality and other material.

5.1.2. There are “This is my opinion” bits that express political views on, for example, population (e.g. DL), boredom and alienated labour (NR), or drug legislation (e.g. DH). The sincerity of these views is implied by the nature of his delivery (see below), by the detail and depth of many of the arguments, and by a consistency across the years with respect to the subjects he addresses and the forms of argument he employs to defend his positions. Common to them is a libertarian (and later anarchist) ethos, and in case we need further proof that what Stanhope performs is also what he believes and lives, he was for a while an independent candidate in the 2008 presidential election (even if this was short-lived because of funding restrictions).¹³

It is noticeable that the “this is my opinion” material reduces over the years, and far more time in his shows is devoted to personal stories. In a recent interview (Venables 2018) he says his act isn’t political, and he is critical of the ‘lazy ... journalist’ who asks him his views on gun control or Trump. ‘I don’t really watch or care... I made a decision many, many years ago that I just play to myself and what I want to talk about.’ The reasons for this decision and their possible significance is discussed below (Section 5.6).

5.1.3. And then there are the directly autobiographical “this happened to me” bits. Examples include the Banana Lady of Okinawa (S); his mother’s assisted suicide (BHP); his girlfriend Bingo’s mental health (NPH); Clark Adams, who postponed his suicide till after his show (FAS); people walking out of his shows or complaining, and other encounters with audiences (e.g. DH); watching NFL with Jake LaMotta (BHP); Bobby Barnett and the baseball wager (SE) and, across all his recordings, various other sexual vignettes involving penis pumps, rubber fists, transvestite hookers, and much more.

5.2. How do we know he’s telling the truth?

Unlike many comedians we rarely hear Stanhope say “... and this is completely true” because the assumption is that when he tells a story as if it’s true, it is true. However, since what is told as if true in stand-up is notoriously untrue, then even when combined with the sincerity

¹³ His libertarian commitment at the time is advertised on the bespoke t-shirt he is wearing in the 2007 *No Refunds* video.

of his delivery this clearly is not much of an argument by itself. How sure can we be that Stanhope's stories are really based in his experiences and largely faithful to them? In the end any answer to this question is open to criticisms of circular reasoning or an infinite regress: the truth of Stanhope's view on himself is premised on an assumed trust in the truth of Stanhope; and on what foundation do we trust anyone vouching for the veracity of Stanhope's stories? As with a court case, however, a variety of sources of evidence come together to leave us with few grounds for reasonable doubt.

5.2.1. Some of Stanhope's stories (such as his mother's suicide (BHP) and Bobby Barnett (STE)) are further verified in his autobiographical books (respectively DUM and TNF, 34). Of course, autobiographies are not known for their objectivity, but they are more reliable than stand-up routines. As a genre they are understood to be a largely true account of at least how the author sees events in his or her life, whereas with stand-up there should be no such expectation.

In his books we also find reflective comments on his comedy. 'Usually,' he says, 'if I have anything to say at all, it's only what I have to say onstage.' (TNF, 112) About the comparison often made to Bill Hicks he points out, 'he had no person. You can listen to everything he's ever recorded and there isn't one iota of any real, soul-baring part of him ... nothing about his life experiences or him as an individual.' (TNF, 207)¹⁴ In contrast, Stanhope informs us that his 'personal life has been stretched wide and wart-riddled onstage for a long, long time.' (TNF, 207)

5.2.2. There are aspects of his lifestyle that are relevant to his act and can't reasonably be hidden, such as having no children or his heavy drinking (he also usually drinks on stage). He discloses his life through his podcast (well over 400 episodes since 2013), and via press interviews and other media (such as the webcasting of his vasectomy operation and a live on-air colonic irrigation for an Alaskan morning radio show). Interviewers have been invited to his house to stay for several days, including Sam Wollaston (2015) for *The Guardian* who says, 'there is a brutal honesty about his material, and about him'. Elsewhere in interviews Stanhope acknowledges a shift in his approach early in his career:

"When I started, I was just a know-nothing dick-joke guy with a mullet," he recalls. "I was 24 years old, with no point of view and nothing to say, other than 'Please fuck me.' It wasn't until '95 or '96 that I started doing something that felt more like an art form than a centerpiece for a bachelor party. That's when I started to take true stories and craft them so they worked on stage, rather than just telling them in a bar. I stopped making stuff up and I stopped doing jokes that I didn't really believe in, and started working on stuff that I meant." (Zanies comedy club, N.D.)

Across all this there is an overwhelming consistency, and no hint of a manipulation of public image. Stanhope's independence and niche appeal contribute to his being unmediated. He does not have 'people' who carefully manage how much of him his fans see or hear, and he is not financially dependent on exposure beyond his core fan base. And thanks now to the podcasts (which include a wide range of contributors) there is a very large amount of this unmediated exposure. Everything in them, and everything we find in the books, the

¹⁴ This is not strictly true: some of Hicks' life experiences are explicitly shared (such as taking mushrooms) or implied in his material. But it is certainly true in the important sense that not only are these moments brief in Hicks' shows and lack detail, you never feel like you are getting anything like the whole person.

interviews, and the testimony of those who know him, supports the stories and the person we encounter in the stand-up act.

5.3. Truth, atmosphere, and Stanhope's audience

Drawing on elements of the philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard, the rest of this article is devoted to making the argument that truthfulness is a fundamental feature of the unusual excellence of Stanhope's comedy. The relationship between his life and his material gives rise to a certain quality to it, a richness and depth. This enables, I want to argue, two things: a distinct atmosphere to his shows, and a more interesting and challenging act.

5.3.1. Atmosphere

Stories and themes allow an act to flow, and the laughter to build, just as regular doses of paracetamol don't just maintain the analgesic effect but increase it. The performer and the crowd feed off one another and grow closer. It's an immersive experience, helped by the audience's trust in the veracity of the stories. While the aesthetic pleasure and the performer-audience relationship primarily results from the humour, it is now also intimately tied to an enjoyment of unusual truths.

'Master comedians are always operating on multiple levels.' Says LeBlanc (2014) 'Stanhope's evolving relationship with his fans, and their stake in his unfolding story, add another satisfying dimension to his freewheeling shows.' By his fans' 'stake in his story' it is meant that they experience it vicariously and empathetically – they feel what he feels because they dig him, and they trust that he is sincere in his evaluations and feelings and that the story is true. For example, about a section of his show on a somewhat tragic porn story (porn he had been watching, of course) LeBlanc (2014) says: 'The bit was not only about porn and its consumption but also about what was going on right that minute between him and the crowd ... The audience members groaned as if they were being punched.'

There is a liquid feel to a Stanhope show; spontaneity is part of the flow and this extends to audience interaction: a clear acknowledgement of their presence and a degree of openness to verbal and non-verbal feedback. He says he's 'no improviser' (TNF, 19), but there is flexibility in what he does. Stories appear to join up, or follow on in unpredictable ways, sometimes depending on interjections from the crowd. This is a form of improvisation that is facilitated by the range of his material and the depth of his acquaintance with it. It is an acquaintance that, because of its faithfulness to his life as lived, goes well beyond what even years of performing a series of fictional or semi-fictional scripts is likely to make possible.

5.3.2. A more challenging act

A Stanhope show, we have seen, is extreme, and this comes naturally to him. The experiences he talks about and the views he expresses are unusual, edgy, often drawn from life's darker recesses. Moreover, he is courageous, adventurous and curious. Some of his

audience are already there, but others of us will learn things and perhaps shift our mood or approach to life, if only temporarily.¹⁵

If there's a lesson here for audiences, or for other comedians, it is to do with exposing life's essentially deep, twisted, elusive weirdness; a weirdness more apparent at the fringes, but also latent in the everyday. Life is an extreme situation, and certain kinds of art enable us to see and feel it this way. There are many ways of achieving this in comedy and Stanhope practices a few of them. Perhaps the hardest is to talk about the kinds of extremes that Stanhope does in a sustained way and with authority. The authority comes from having done the things that reveal life's peculiarities (which also makes them funnier), and the material is sustained by the unusual nature of his own personality and by the possession of a range of virtues, including curiosity.

Comedians are in the unusual position of generating social dissent - indirectly through characterisations and stories, or directly through voicing opinions, offering arguments, and generally being critical – while reserving the right not to enter-into any further dialogue. All the time they make us laugh the floor is theirs and it is a mistake to then expect them to have to defend the positions expressed in their performances. However, they can make a choice to step out of what Paul Provenza calls the 'charmed circle' (Lee 2010, 150), and clearly many want to do this (Mark Thomas, John Stewart, Trevor Noah, Hannah Gadsby etc.). They become social activists or public thinkers as well as comedians, and once this happens, whether audiences are laughing or not, they are obliged to defend their views. Stanhope very explicitly made this shift when he ran for president, but that aside there is generally a strong sense in which he wants his views to be taken seriously. In his case the autobiographical element seems to be part of this desire as well; his public presence doesn't stop at performance.

Social pressure points have infused Stanhope's work in the tradition of Bruce, Carlin, Pryor and Hicks: population control, civil liberties, mental health stigma, and so on. More importantly for present purposes, and in consideration of Stanhope's current position of 'no longer having a point', the challenge to others also derives from the virtues mentioned or implied: sincerity, courage, adventurousness, curiosity, open-mindedness, sympathy and self-honesty.

In this respect he can be considered a role model for some, but perhaps primarily he is a role model in the sense of having the courage not to be normal, to self-discover, self-create, and acknowledge life's ever-present darkness. A sign of self-alienation is boredom, and the problem of boredom - a 'disease worse than cancer' (DH) - is a consistent theme for Stanhope. In NR (2007) he makes the important observation that people put up with work that doesn't suit them - and so bores them - for the sake of chasing an impoverished or illusory dream (money, status). Ever since he has not needed the money he is not interested in TV work, films, sitcoms, or filling arenas. He's tried it, he's lived in LA, but he found it restrictive. In stand-up – where 'you are the director, the performer, the producer' - he finds freedom. (cited in LeBlanc, 2014) Despite it scaring him, he sees stand-up as fundamental to the kind of comedy he does and his reasons for doing it. No compromise is required; it is 'free', 'pure'. (LeBlanc, 2014)

¹⁵ In FAS he jokes about how his show will not only remind the audience of the problems they have but also introduces them to problems they never knew they had.

One way to be open or confessional is to have little to lose. If you are content enough with a certain type and size of audience, and this audience is loyal, then this is a platform for free expression. The megastar, grown used to fame and wealth, has a much greater need to be cautious. In contrast, the steady build-up of a core audience provides a small but stable foundation that permits less self-censorship (and his apparently cheap and increasingly personalised home in Bisbee, Arizona is perhaps a metaphor for this). Anyone who is going to be repulsed by what he reveals and comments on would have left the scene long ago.

Supporting the ‘courage to be authentic’ lesson we can draw from Stanhope’s comedy goes a form of solidarity born of humility. This can be understood as a variation of the ‘inferiority’ theory of humour (Solomon 2002; Critchley 2002), the self-deprecation Chirico (2016, 25-30) sees as driving the autobiographical humour of David Sedaris’ monologues, and an aspect of Stewart Lee’s fool or clown as previously discussed (see also Lee 2012, 27n). Because he is so honest, we really do gain a ‘warts ‘n’ all’ insight into him. He admits, for example, that the show he did for which one of his fans, it turned out, had postponed his suicide to see, was awful (‘phoned in’) (FAS); that his attack on visual art in BTG is in part motivated by his tendency, in a certain mood, towards not liking anything he can’t do or doesn’t understand; that he is in terrible physical shape, has a small dick, and (his dick aside) is often terrible in bed.¹⁶ He confesses that he drinks before and during shows because of fear (e.g. before his Iceland prison gig he says, ‘I was nervous, not because I was going into a prison but because I’d have to do a show without drinking’ (TNF, 132)); he laments being ageist (“the worst ‘ism’” (DLB)), and he recounts fear and humiliation on stage when the Banana Lady (of Okinawa) ‘pants’ him in front of an audience of largely US Marines (S). When talking about how he always gives a cigarette to homeless people even if not prepared to give them money he then, in a footnote, admits ‘I’ve caught myself at least thirty times denying homeless people cigarettes since I wrote this. I’m a hypocrite.’ (TNF, 47) Also in TNF (151) he berates himself for not calling out Joe Francis, the producer of *Girls Gone Wild*, for his abhorrent behaviour, particularly towards women: ‘I wish I’d said something. He is fucking disgusting. I tried my best to avoid him but that doesn’t excuse what I’d become part of and still doesn’t.’

5.4. Stanhope and ‘inwardness’

The emerging analogue in philosophy for the kind of authenticity we find in Stanhope is Kierkegaard’s emphasis on ‘inwardness’, primarily discussed in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Kierkegaard is quick to point out that inwardness is not self-reflection, but rather the subjective and individualized elements of understanding that refers primarily to our appreciation of ethical and religious truths. For Kierkegaard (and for many of those interested in virtue theory) the real value of such truths concerns the way they are appreciated in the context of one’s life. A distinction is made between an intellectual or abstract belief in the truth or importance of something, and feeling and acting in a way that is consistent with that belief. ‘Inwardness’ is the result of a quality of understanding in which one’s experiences and sense of what matters – one’s engagement with life – is in alignment with one’s rational assessment of what is objectively true. This latter aspect by itself will usually be open to rational doubt, but truth, understood subjectively, is ‘an objective uncertainty held fast in an

¹⁶ “Hello, Sarah?” (in OBBN) is a brilliant, very funny, example of this in which he envisions a grossed-out young woman who has made the mistake of sleeping with him phoning her friend and describing her traumatic experience.

appropriation-process' (Kierkegaard 1941, 182). The experience and 'passion' that commits the self to a certain view of the world or form of life is the 'appropriation process.'

It's easy to imagine how being authentic in this Kierkegaardian sense will add to a comedian's talent, just as it's likely to with any serious artist. The emerging virtues – self-honesty, courage, open-mindedness, curiosity, commitment to first-hand knowledge, humility – will contribute to a way of seeing the world that is distinctive, varied, rich and insightful. What though of the autobiographical element? It is quite possible, after all, to be authentic in this Kierkegaardian sense and yet not be an autobiographical comedian. I would suggest, however, that the reverse is not true: it is not possible to be honest and sincere to the extent that Stanhope is, and in a style that is as non-alienating to audiences and friends and associates as his is, whilst not being authentic. If open, detailed, Type 5 storytelling containing the spontaneity of sincerity is the foundation of your art, then to be accepting of yourself might well be a prerequisite for such consistent and good-natured self-disclosure.

Psychotherapist Carl Rogers' distinction between 'congruence' and 'transparency' sheds some helpful light on this connection. Roughly, congruence means knowing and accepting one's self (good and bad elements), and transparency refers to the revealing of that self in therapeutic contexts. (Lietaer 1993, 31-5) Since it is crucial for a trusting relationship between the therapist and the patient/client, a therapist must have congruence. Crucial for the same reason are spontaneous responses to the patient/client, and spontaneous moments involve transparency. Transparency, however, is risky unless there is an underlying congruence. Therefore, in order to allow herself to be fully spontaneous the therapist must have congruence. If we treat congruence as similar to inwardness, and remember that the autobiographical in Stanhope reaches well beyond a superficial recounting of true stories and towards a spontaneous revealing of his personality, preferences and values, then we can see that Stanhope's excellence is similarly reliant on inwardness.

5.5. A concern about contrivance

A challenge to the authenticity of Stanhope's act comes from the line between talking about things that have happened to him with little or no contrivance in the normal course of life, and doing things in order to be able to talk about them on stage.

A mantra of Stanhope's is 'it's only funny if you actually do it.' (DUM, 283; TNF, 33) I take the spirit of this to be simply that true stories are funnier than made up ones, but at another level it could mean that you seek out unusual experiences because they will improve your act. The best situation – what we want to get from comedians like Stanhope – is that they do these things for reasons other than what makes good material for the act (i.e. for various intrinsic pleasures, satisfying curiosity, and so on). For example, Dave Gorman sending bee hives to celebrities with the purpose of talking about it in his comedy show (*Modern Life is Goodish*, Series 3, Episode 4) is a significantly different artistic form than Henry Rollins recounting stories about his first Ramones gig or recording a drum and bass rant with William Shatner. In Rollins' case these things were not done for the telling or for the laughs, they were done for reasons intrinsic to his unfolding life. As a result, they have a depth, richness and fascination that is absent from Gorman's entertaining but ultimately two-dimensional approach. Since the uncontrived approach is a far better fit with Stanhope's appeal – his exposure to us as something more than a comedian – then the suggestion that his primary motivation for doing the things he does is to improve his act is a threat to its quality.

Some of Stanhope's antics seem to fall between the Gorman-Rollins poles indicated above. His experiences are not contrived to the extent of Gorman's, but there's no doubt that when certain opportunities arise, at least part of his decision making is based on how they can provide material for his act. In TNF there is in fact an entire chapter entitled 'Never shy away from the chance of a good story'.

The *degree* to which this plays a part matters though. Consider three examples:

- Applying for and accepting a job on a gay phone sex line because of 'what good material it would make.' (TNF, 41)
- About taking mushrooms in Iceland he recounts: 'We weren't really in the mood to trip but sometimes you have to push yourself. How often will we have the opportunity to tell a story like this?' (TNF, 135-6)
- In Anchorage a drunken guy who has been thrown out of the bar returns with a shot gun: 'Trinka [musician Jacqui Trinka] yelled for me to get away but the drink had taken away any natural fear ... [and] I didn't want to miss the story.' (TNF, 84)

With these in mind I will make several points on this issue that mitigate the impact of this story-telling motivation on Stanhope's distinctive appeal.

5.5.1. The gay phone sex line is clearly more contrived than the other two examples, but it's important that all three cases are opportunistic in the sense of arising out of, and being congruent with, the course of his life. Similarly, his response to events matches his personality (not just his profession) – curious, intolerant of boredom, and with a bravery and charisma that allow him to make the most of unusual opportunities. In other words, the decisions he makes with stories in mind are ultimately nested in the larger self and its commitments.

5.5.2. We should not forget that some of Stanhope's best stories and strongest material fairly clearly derive from events that couldn't feasibly be sought out for the sake of the comedy. For example, he didn't orchestrate his mother's suicide or Bingo's strife in order to be funny about them.

5.5.3. There is a blurry line between things happening and seeking them out as comedy material. The recommendation, 'never shy away from the chance of a good story' (as per the Iceland and Anchorage examples) is not the same as saying 'seek out good stories'. In the former case things happen in the normal course of life, choices are made, and one consideration among others is that a good story might come from it. At times the implied openness (as opposed to active searching) can be detected in the language Stanhope uses. For example, after Bingo suffered a 'mental break' not long before a show he says the show 'sucked' in part because 'I can't not open with what just happened and what just happened didn't even yet make sense to me.' (TNF, 139) It seems significant that he says, 'what just happened' rather than 'what I just did'.

The person who tells stories is not necessarily consciously looking for them, but they are more likely to be tuned into their possibility. Rather than force events to make a story there should be a 'readiness' for them (to borrow a term from Heidegger (1962)); a state in which one is primed to receive them. The suitably primed (or ready) individual might attend closely to certain unusual details in her surroundings, or she might be curious and able to put a comic spin on situations that are otherwise out of her control. When Stanhope randomly receives a call in his hotel room that is meant for John Lydon (of PiL), for example, he decides to

pretend to be him (see TNF). Or during the weeks between receiving an out of the blue phone message from Johnny Depp (who he didn't know at the time), and Depp finally calling again, he uses this baffling message in his act. (TNF, 277-81)

This raises the question of whether there can be any professions that don't prime our engagements with the world in some way or another. As a lecturer I am primed to see research opportunities or teaching resources where others wouldn't, and so too a comedian will inevitably and habitually look for the funny. If this is accepted then having a broad orientation towards one's daily life that is conditioned by one's profession becomes a baseline. Contrivance is gauged in terms of the difference between this bias and events that are actively engineered, and it's important than Stanhope inhabits the right end of this scale. Overall, he does.

5.6. The next stage

There is a really interesting moment in the final track on BTG (his 2012 special) where he talks about how he used to cover issues in his act (population, abortion, marriage, vice laws etc.) but that now he's stopped caring. In his career he says he's made maybe twelve good points, but then employs an analogy to explain his frustration at how this doesn't change anything. In a world full of starving people, you occasionally notice some food around and point it out to people for a living, but instead of eating it and gaining 'nutrition' from it, they 'shove it up their noses and assholes for entertainment value.' (As this part continues and he mimics his friends agreeing with his insights about children and marriage whilst rationalising doing the opposite, he's pouring beer into his eye, ear, and nose.) So, he's stopped doing this because he realises it makes no difference, not only to social institutions or public attitudes, but his own 'social circle' as well. He has lost interest.

This genuinely does seem to have signalled a shift for Stanhope, but rather than necessarily leading to a regression to a nihilistic existence, there is the possibility of a more advanced understanding of himself and the world. In terms of his act though, where does he go? As the issues he covers decrease, the autobiographical stories increase, but a lack of direction can also be detected. The trouble is that for an act like his to work he needs to be able to talk, not only about things that are true, but about things that matter to him and that can be worked into stories that are both funny and resonate with his audience. For example, he is at his best in the 2016 special (NPH) in the bit about mental illness and Bingo (who he says has schizoaffective and bi-polar disorders). It's very personal, but at the same time her situation (and the story's main stimulus in the set, the shooting and subsequent mental impairment of Arizona congresswoman Gabby Giffords) is worked into an important social point about the way what he calls 'Camp 1' mental disorders are regarded and treated.¹⁷ It's cleverly structured, has a point, and is very funny.¹⁸ However, other material on NPH is flabbier and less substantial, the quality of the show on his most recent visit to the UK (2018) was also inconsistent. The impression is that being (very understandably) unwilling to address the

¹⁷ Stanhope divides mental disorders in 'Camp 1' and 'Camp 2'. The former are those that are 'disturbing' to the person with them (OCD, depression, schizophrenia etc.), and the latter are those that aren't (such as Down's syndrome or intellectual disability).

¹⁸ On Twitter Stanhope says that this routine is one of his best. There is a similar pattern in the most recent special (DLB) where one of the strongest parts (and the show's finale) is the combining of a point about the value of comedy for "when life gets its ugliest" with the story of Laura Kimble, a fan who was diagnosed with terminal cancer.

issues that he and other radical or deeper thinking comedians have traditionally addressed has left a vacuum in his act. He perhaps now needs some new ‘points’ in order to be at his best. An added consideration is that his highly entertaining podcasts – conversations with others in which they also do a lot of talking – and his books (which are excellent) seem to be important alternative forums for where Stanhope is currently at.

6. Conclusion

This article has sought to analyse the role and value of truth and autobiography in stand-up comedy. Appreciating how widespread stories are in this art form I have suggested a typology based around the degree of truth of the stories told and the grammatical person in which they are told. Even if we’re not fully sure of the reasons why, first-person narratives tend to be funnier than third person, and so are often employed by story-telling comics. It is also accepted among comedians and comedy fans that, despite being conveyed in a style that implies sincerity, most of these stories are significantly embellished or just made up. Since audiences would generally like to believe the stories they are told are true and, where relevant, the evaluations they make are sincere (and in some cases will believe they are), this creates a certain unease in the relationship between comedians and audiences.

On this basis a case is made for the distinctive value of largely truth-based, first-person stand-up routines, and Doug Stanhope is used as an indication of what this approach can help achieve in terms of the comedian’s relationship with their audience and the possibility of a more challenging act. It is also argued that these elements are exaggerated in Stanhope’s case because with him you get something close to the whole person. However, in order to maintain this degree of self-disclosure without impeding the quality of his material or his interaction with his audience another level of authenticity is required. With the help of Kierkegaard and Carl Rogers I argue that the ideas of inwardness, congruence and transparency not only help us understand Stanhope’s impressiveness as a person, but are prerequisite for the depth, richness and spontaneity of the self-disclosure that is basic to the distinctive excellence of his comedy.

I must stress that this is not a judgement on stand-up comedy as a whole, but only on its autobiographical variations. The possibilities of stand-up are ‘infinite’ (Lee 2010, 39); I am arguing, though, that if its style is autobiographical there are reasons why the truthfulness of these stories matters, and why their relationship to the wider personality of the teller can matter as well. Above all it must, of course, be funny, but there are laughs that evaporate and laughs that have substance. Substance derives from many places, but prominent among them is the transparent alignment of the story, the point, the personality, and the truth. This is fully realised in the work of Stanhope and, I believe, fundamental to why he is regarded as one of the best around.

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Doug Stanhope releases: Key to abbreviations

BHP: Beer Hall Putsch

BTG: Before Turning the Gun on Himself

DH: Deadbeat Hero

DL: Die Laughing

DUM: Digging up Mother

DLB: Dying of a Last Breed

FAS: From Across the Street

NPH: No Place Like Home

NR: No Refunds

OBBN: Oslo: Burning the Bridge to Nowhere

S: Sicko

STE: Something to Take the Edge Off

TNF: This is Not Fame

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